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Developments in Indochina

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Developments in Indochina

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Friction between the Khmer Communists and Vietnamese Communist forces in the border provinces of Kampot and Takeo has become more pronounced in recent months. There are some reports of armed clashes in mid-July.

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The Communists are putting special emphasis on establishing commercial relations in areas controlled by Saigon. Their objective is not only to purchase needed non-military supplies, but also to make contact with the people and with local GVN officials.

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CAMBODIA

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Bad Blood in The South

...the peoples of Cambodia and Vietnam [are as] two brothers, neighbors, comrades-in-arms who have always fought side by side and are ready to give mutual support and assistance.

Nothing and nobody can separate us [Cambodia and North Vietnam] from one another. We have always intimately shared weal and woe. We have a common goal...

Pham Van Dong, Hanoi,
April 1973

Sihanouk, Hanoi,
April 1973

Effusive expressions of Vietnamese-Cambodian solidarity such as these may have some propaganda value to Sihanouk and his Vietnamese allies, but they do not sell well in some sections of Cambodia. Frictions between Khmer and Vietnamese Communist forces, which have at times led to open hostilities, are particularly conspicuous in areas bordering South Vietnam. North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops in those areas have complicated their relations with the local Khmer Communists by imposing taxes and by restricting trade and travel of Cambodian villagers. Although both sides try to minimize their differences, recently relations are apparently getting worse instead of better.

The problem is particularly evident in Kampot and Takeo. A main irritant in these two provinces has been the gradual--and sometimes forceful--displacement of Cambodian villagers along the border by the Vietnamese Communists. The loss of fertile rice-lands, coupled with extensive rice purchasing and requisitioning by Vietnamese in Cambodian villages, has resulted in a rice shortage in both provinces. In an attempt to husband remaining rice stocks, Khmer Communist officials have tried unsuccessfully to curtail the flow of rice across the border into South

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Vietnam. Frustrations built up even further when insurgent forces in Kampot and Takeo had difficulty in drawing ammunition and arms from Vietnamese stocks stored near the border and were unable to extend their nascent administrative system into Vietnamese-occupied zones.

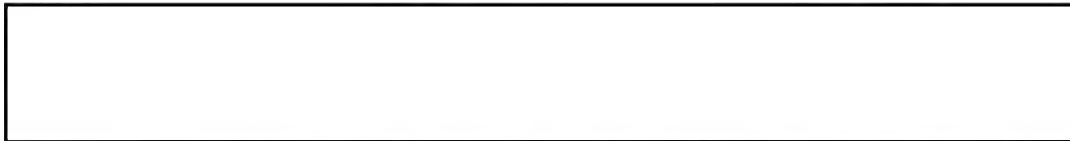
This past June, resentful Khmer Communists seized Vietnamese supplies on several occasions and harassed some Vietnamese Communist forces in Kampot and Takeo. In mid-July, when Vietnamese units moved into two districts in Kampot to quell the worst disturbances, local Khmer villagers and insurgent troops resisted, and in the ensuing fighting an estimated 50 to 200 Cambodians were killed or wounded. There have been reports of subsequent armed clashes in this area.

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Khmer and Vietnamese Communist leaders will almost certainly try hard to restore orderly--if not cordial--relations in Kampot. The incidents in that province emphasize the fragility of the war-time alliance between the Khmer and Vietnamese Communist rank and file, and probably portend greater postwar problems for the leaders of both sides.

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SOUTH VIETNAM

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Communists Stress Economic
Subversion

The Communists are working hard to develop binding commercial deals with local government authorities and businessmen as part of their "political struggle" strategy. The Viet Cong provincial party committee in a border province north of Saigon reportedly told subordinate district committees in early July that such economic ties are still important because they support Communist supply efforts, permit the development of "liberated areas," and undercut Saigon's economic and political controls at the grass-roots level. While illicit trafficking with the Viet Cong has always been a problem for the government, the Communists seem to be conducting a much more consistent and carefully planned campaign since the cease-fire. South Vietnamese authorities in the same province reported that more than half of the traders and merchants arrested in July for trading with the Communists were Viet Cong operatives.

Since the cease-fire in January, much of the Communist commercial effort has been directed toward setting up purchase and transportation agencies to procure much-needed non-military supplies. In some urban areas, such as Da Nang, the Communists reportedly now have full-service organizations that take care of procurement, storage, and transportation of goods. In some provinces, including Long Khanh and Quang Ngai, Viet Cong purchasing agencies operate "stations" that buy from government-controlled markets. Although the Communists have found it necessary to establish their own markets in some areas, they reportedly have been able, for the most part, to utilize facilities already existing in government-held areas. The Communists prefer to do business with established firms because it gives them access to both the people and local GVN officials in Saigon-controlled areas.

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In Quang Ngai Province the Communists have bribed government officials and soldiers at remote outposts to transport Communist supplies aboard military vehicles. Similar success has been reported in Da Nang, where the Viet Cong reportedly have used official government vehicles to move some of their goods. The decline in military activity has left government motor pools with idle equipment and under-employed drivers, a situation the Viet Cong are working hard to exploit.

How successful the Communists have been is not clear, but government authorities in several areas have become increasingly concerned in recent weeks. In the northern coastal provinces, where the Viet Cong appear to be the best organized, the inadequacy of government attempts in May and June to stop the illicit trade has prompted senior military and police officials to pool their intelligence and security resources. On 31 July, the Military Region 1 commander General Truong ordered the arrest of nearly 180 military and civilian officials--ranging from a village policeman to four Lower House deputies--in Quang Ngai Province. By 2 August all but the four deputies had been taken into custody. The involvement of local political and law-enforcement officials in trade, as well as the large profits to be made by both officials and local traders, constrains the government from moving effectively against the new Viet Cong drive.

Recent Communist assessments of their progress also attest to the problems the government faces in trying to stop this activity. According to a review of the situation in a province north of Saigon by a Viet Cong provincial party committee, government police have been able to discourage a few small traders, but have not hindered most Communist economic undertakings. According to the review, Communist trade and money are welcomed by government officials and businessmen in the urban areas, as well as by troops and policemen stationed along the supply routes. The review claims that the replacement of government officials suspected of dealing with the Communists has had little effect. Senior government officials in the Saigon area have, in fact, admitted that payoffs, family relationships, and high-level protectors in Saigon are severely undermining the government's effort to cut off trade with the Viet Cong.

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